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Preface

We wrote this book not as academics but as women, moms, and teachers living in a world of reality TV, instant messaging, and preteen lingerie. We teach about girls' and women's development in our day jobs, and we've both written books about girls. We are considered experts and are called by journalists when they want a comment about a recent incident involving a girl or a new trend. We didn't take on this project as "experts," though, but as consumers of a culture we share and sometimes don't share with girls—culture as presented in stores such as Victoria's Secret and Hot Topic; kid cartoons such as *Kim Possible* and *SpongeBob SquarePants*; Mean Girl and Princess movies; magazines from *Teen Voices* to *Teen People*; books from Newbery winners to *Gossip Girls*; reality shows such as *America's Next Top Model* and *The Bachelorette*; and all the other things that capture girls' imaginations, time, and energy in the new millennium.

We've been told our world empowers girls by offering them anything they want, including infinite sights and endless ports of call. In reality, it's a world designed by media and marketing executives that targets children as consumers, channels girls' desires, and entices them into predictable types: "pretty pink dolls," "cute little shoppers," and "hott teens."

We did research to find out what girls are listening to, reading, and watching so that we could make sense of girl culture and think about what it means to our daughters and to us as parents and as muses to the next generation of girls. Beyond our own research we drew from the insights of scholars and popular culture gurus who have analyzed such products as magazines and lyrics, as well as from psychologists who have measured the influence of TV on the development of children, and more. What we would like to convey is something less particular and more systemic: a way of looking at the world that is both simple and revolutionary, a habit of seeing. We believe that parents can do what we've done without any particular training. They can analyze what their daughter sees, hears, wears, and reads in terms of how girlhood is packaged and sold to her.

This may sound like a cynical way to view the world, but once you see the insidious patterns and techniques of the media and marketers, you, too, will be suspicious. Just as you now read the nutrition content on the side of a cereal box before buying it for your child, you will be able to read the messages in the shows she watches, the stores she walks into, and the activities she engages in. It is our hope that moms and dads will be able to present the world to their daughters in such a way that she will have real choices in the world.

Researchers and educators in the 1970s began some important work when they analyzed how girls were represented in math story problems; they found that girls were less represented than boys and were shown doing traditionally feminine tasks such as cooking and sewing. These researchers and educators published studies which showed that both girls and boys pictured scientists as men in white lab coats; that few storybooks had female protagonists; and that to young children male pronouns are not gender neutral at all. They showed us that gender unfairness in school classrooms can be revealed by simply counting who gets called on and what kinds of feedback they receive from teachers. We all benefited from this foundational work that uncovered basic unfairness and its effects on children.

In today's world, where more young women than young men are going to college, where girls have opportunities to do so much more than ever before, the issue is not a simple one of who gets more or less. There are more women now on prime-time TV, but when they are competing in hot tubs for the attention of one man or undergoing radical surgery to compete in a beauty contest, we can see that simply being on TV isn't enough. The problem is one of image. What choices, what ways of being a girl are offered to our girls as they make their way in the world? We must look beyond the numbers at the kinds of girls presented and created as models for all girls. In our so-called girl power world, we can get fooled into thinking there is equity, but it's more complicated than counting up how many girls are on cereal boxes. If you do that counting (we did), you will find many more boys than girls. Depending on the TV season, you may find no leading girls or girl characters on the covers of these boxes. Turn them around, look on the backs, and zero in on the gender of the cartoon characters. You will also see that girls are wearing the bows and barrettes, and boys are wearing the binoculars; that girls are passengers, and boys are drivers; that girls are batting long eyelashes, and boys are batting baseballs.

We encourage parents to look beyond the particulars and start to see

the big picture. Examine that cute pink purse attached to the brand-name jeans and see that same little purse and jeans on a popular doll, in a popular movie, in a popular magazine; see it talked about in a popular book series and worn by a popular artist on a popular Web site and on a popular book's cover. You will begin to appreciate the impact of marketing on your daughter. Her "choice" to buy that purse suddenly doesn't seem so free. Parents who look further and see that all the new jeans have little pink purses and make the connection to those other messages that encourage young girls to see themselves as "hott," cute little shoppers will appreciate the larger intent of marketers and understand that what first appears as a lot of disconnected items actually amounts to a hard sell and big money for companies—at your daughter's expense. Once your eyes have been opened, you might start looking for patterns and analyzing everything that has gone through the hands of marketers and the media. And once you start doing that, there is no going back. You've lost the mindless innocence that marketers hope you have. You will be harder to fool and a harder sell. Most important, you'll see that every new package a marketer creates is more of the same and hardly new at all. Score one for the parents and one for the daughters, too, because parents can help girls see what they're being sold about themselves.

Our focus is not just on the manipulation, however. There are wonderful books that warn parents about the cheesy and deceitful ways that marketers target our children. We also look at the message they're selling through their practice, a message about normal girlhood packaged in the form of that little pink purse, the sexy performer who wears it, the tight low-rider jeans it is attached to, and the pouty hot boy it is supposed to attract. The little purse connects girlhood with shopping, yes, but mostly it defines a kind of girl, whether she's shopping or not.

We are focusing on girls, but parents can apply this method of analyzing popular culture to the world of boys and see the kind of boy who is marketed through WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment), violent video games, and the proliferation of war toys. This marketing of boyhood is as pervasive as the marketing of girlhood, but we believe that the particular identities offered to girls today through this marketing are more problematic because they offer so much less real power in exchange for pseudo-powerful activities.

Parents have to compete with this bright and shiny world before it gobbles up their interesting, feisty daughters and spits them out in pink satin Wonderbras and panties. It's a world of spectacle and sensationalistic stories. Headlines scream: Young girls are having plastic surgery and

taking steroids! Oral sex is rampant in middle schools! Sex bracelets! Pro-anorexia Web sites! Girls post sexy pictures on the Internet for money! Most girls don't, won't, and aren't, of course, but the stories keep us all on edge and worried about the possibilities. While any parent can look at these trends and say, "Well, my daughter doesn't do that. She's safe," or "I would never allow my daughter to do that," and feel safe, this *Fear Factor* world has become the red herring that drives parental concerns, distracting them from realizing their daughters' lives are filled with stereotypes and narrow images. The power of the everyday is more damaging than the occasional sensational story. Look at the TV shows she watches, hear the lyrics she listens to, and go into the stores she frequents. While most girls will never get breast implants, most will play with Barbie, see the new cleavage-creating bras at Victoria's Secret (the recent one has been patented), and watch *The Swan* or some other cosmetic surgery makeover show.

Our technique is not to keep girls away from the real world, but to join with them in understanding it, rising above it, detaching from it, and critiquing it. It is hard to do. But trust us: It is much harder to undo the damage of a pre-packaged image of girlhood than to learn this way of seeing.

Introduction

Isn't "girl power" great? Girls are getting so much more attention these days and are free to be whoever they choose. If you believe this, you're not to blame; that's what marketers have been selling you and your daughter ever since the invention of the phrase. We want to show you that the beginning of a genuine movement to give girls more power and more choice got co-opted and turned into a marketing scheme that reinforced age-old stereotypes. These stereotypes are everywhere, from Disney movies to hip-hop lyrics, Nickelodeon cartoons to *Seventeen* magazine.

Marketers, illustrators, authors, songwriters, TV producers, movie scriptwriters, journalists, buyers for mall stores, and more are currently competing with you for the right to teach your little girl what it means to be a girl. To all these people trying to shape your daughter and narrow her vision, girls are not much more than a string of stereotypes: Your littlest girls are "perfect little angels," sometimes with a sassy twist; your elementary school girls are boy-crazy tweens, ready to be sold a version of mini-teendom that eclipses the wonderful years of childhood which truly belong to them; your middle school girls are full-fledged teenagers or at least teenage wannabes eager to conform to that *CosmoGIRL!* lifestyle. Your high school girls are sold an identity story of the sexually free model-diva-rock star that the younger girls are supposed to look up to.

We are two moms and friends and also developmental psychologists. Lyn has a daughter, teaches girls' development to young women at Colby College, and helps to run Hardy Girls Healthy Women in Maine. Sharon has two sons and six nieces, teaches hundreds of young women at Saint Michael's College, and sees girls and teens in her therapy practice in Vermont. We have been studying girls for more than twenty years now and believe there needs to be a different message other than a warped version of "girl power." That message is now corrupt and used too frequently to sell your daughter an image of being powerful; this means tons of money spent every day to help girls look powerful and feel powerful by conforming to a stereotyped image of an independent,

"hott," boy-obsessed, shopping teenager. Too little money is spent on developing the activities and programs and guidance that girls need to become truly powerful.

We want to take the pressure off girls to conform to this image of the powerful girl and put the power back in the hands of moms and dads who want to learn about their daughters' world and communicate directly with them about the things they wear, watch, hear, read, and play. In *Freaky Friday* fashion, we will help you feel what it's like to be in your daughter's skin. Each chapter will take you through the world of girls ages four to eighteen, a world that changes rapidly from Bratz dolls to sexy lingerie, from Saturday-morning cartoons to nighttime soap, from Raffi to rap videos. We will do more than show you what your daughter is being sold. We will help you to have the important conversations with her that *must* start at an early age.

Our advice is simple: Talk to her about what you see. We will not tell you to turn your TVs off or throw away her Polly Pocket dolls or forbid her to see certain movies or listen to certain rap songs. We cannot shut off the world. The images and stereotypes are everywhere and need to be addressed. Most important, you're the one who needs to address them, to bring them to your daughter's awareness and help her develop a critical sense of the world around her. You can start doing this when she is about four. Sure, from day one her grandparents might be pushing pink as if there were no other colors of the rainbow, but you're the one she most wants to hear from. Although she has sucked up a lot of visual images by three or four, the age when gender identification begins to settle in and gather some permanence, she will be listening more closely to *your* thinking about what it means to be a girl and the kind of choices you'd like her to have as she grows up.

We want to be clear about one thing before you take this journey with us. We're not writing about the inner girl. That discussion has run its course and, frankly, puts too much pressure on girls to conform and be perfect even when authors identify striving to be "good little girls" as one of the problems. Parents know that to "raise strong girls" they can try to get them to play more sports, talk to them about standing up to bullies, and tell them how wonderful girls are. But has all the talk about girls' psychology changed the culture? Watch the Discovery Channel, open an American Girl catalog, or take a walk through Limited Too, and you'll see stereotypes of girls with very limited choices about who they can be

alongside continuous pleas for them to shop, primp, chat, and do the things girls are "supposed to do." In fact, be aware that every time the phrase "girl power" is used, it means the power to make choices *while shopping!*

This book isn't about self-esteem. We don't buy into the view that low self-esteem is the biggest problem for girls today. Girls get plenty of self-esteem whenever they can fit themselves into an image that marketers have created, and that's the way they're enticed to seek out confidence. Some have said that marketers create impossible ideals that girls cannot live up to; we think marketers are more clever than that. Even as they present an ideal girl, they make her appealingly vulnerable and offer aspects of her image to every girl with the purchase of an accessory or two for only a few dollars. Marketers know that girls do feel better when they shop, buy the newest lip gloss, and conform to current fashion trends by creating their own little makeovers. If they didn't, the industry would fail.

In the end, it's the market and it's the media. Some savvy parents try to counteract the draw of these two forces on their girls but find that they, too, are pulled in by the pink and pretty stuff for the young girl as well as the glamorous "hott" and fun-looking stuff for the middle schoolers. These things *are* pretty and they *are* cute even when we know we're being sold a narrow image of how a girl should dress, think, act, and *be*. But parents must learn to resist pop culture, too. You can resist without saying no, forbidding, and turning off the TV. We want parents to be confident critics of culture so that they can raise daughters who can resist what they are being sold.

We believe that parents can help their daughters read the culture, recognize bids to turn her into a "Stepford girl," and help her defy the marketers who are trying to sell her an identity story that they call "girl power" but that only makes girls feel powerful when they are conforming to the cute, sweet, hot, little shoppers they think girls should be. Parents can see when the world around their daughters is sucking up that lovely youthful energy and luring them to express it in ways that could box in their futures. Parents know that their girls are up for grabs, enticed into the commercial culture through more than advertisements. If parents are better informed, though, and learn how to talk with their daughters—to listen more closely to their views and to express more clearly their own thoughts and feelings—they can compete with the consumerism, the market, and the media.